

**Remarks for Senator James Mathias for
Washington's Birthday Ceremony
*February 21, 2011***

Good Evening.

George Washington did not like public speaking and, while he did appreciate reasoned debate, he was a life-long believer in both brevity and civility in debating issues vital to the future of the country.

In an article published several years ago, the state archivist related a story of Washington's willingness to preside over and listen to all sides of an argument, even when the discussion got warm and the debaters at times pressed their points too far for too long. In fact, at the Federal Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787, Benjamin Franklin was one of the last speakers to comment on the accomplishments of that distinguished body as they prepared themselves to sign the Constitution:

On the final day, as the last delegates were signing the document, Franklin pointed toward the sun on the back of the Convention president's chair. Observing that painters had found it difficult to distinguish in their art a rising sun from a setting sun, he went on to say: "I have often ... in the course of the session ... looked at that sun behind the President without being able to tell whether it was rising or setting. But now at length I have the happiness to know it is a rising and not a setting sun."

But Benjamin Franklin would not be the last speaker. On a Monday afternoon in September 1787, the Constitutional Convention was at last nearing the end of its deliberations and Franklin moved that the Convention sign the engrossed copy. But before the final question could be put, Nathaniel Gorham of Massachusetts, supported by his colleague Rufus King and Daniel Carroll of Maryland, offered a further motion that changed representation in the lower house from one representative per 40,000 to one per 30,000.

Having heard the debate, reviewed the record, and consulted with the experts outside the convention, Washington rose to make his one and only speech since the opening day. Washington told the delegates that he was sensible of "the impropriety of your chairman's intermingling in your debates, yet I cannot help observing, that the small number which constitutes the representative body, appears to be a defect in your plan. It would better suit my ideas and, I believe, it will be more grateful to the wishes of the people, if that number was increased."

So convincing was he that the motion passed without dissent, forcing the only erasure on the beautifully written official copy of the Constitution, an erasure still plainly in evidence today.

The people of Maryland first read about Washington's speech in the Baltimore *Maryland Gazette* of Friday, November 16, 1787. To the *Gazette*, Washington's remarks were a clear instance of the influence of a good and great man. "[It] will, we presume, be acceptable to every reader who loves his country, and venerates its darling hero . . ."

In a gesture of support for representative democracy, Washington potentially doubled the representation of new states admitted to the Union. The previous July, the Confederation Congress had passed the Northwest Ordinance permitting the formation of new states in the Ohio country when their population reached 60,000. With Washington's erasure they could now have two representatives instead of one.

Equally important, Washington offered an olive branch to the Constitution's harshest critics, among whom was his neighbor George Mason. In December 1787, Mason admitted in the Baltimore *Maryland Journal* that his fear that the House of Representatives would be "the shadow only of representation" was "in some degree lessened by an amendment often before refused, and at last made by an erasure, after the engrossing on parchment, of the word forty, and inserting thirty." By his support of the change, Washington reached out to friends and foes alike, demonstrating to the world that the carefully written document awaiting the signatures of the Convention could never be finished but always would be subject to correction and change.

Note that he did so with brevity and carefully orchestrated civility. From childhood he trained himself in the Rules of Civility that his tutor had him transcribe in his always neat and precise handwriting, handwriting that today is so legible that it can still be easily read. Sometime before the age of 16, he transcribed 110 rule of behavior which he memorized and incorporated into the very being of his actions for the rest of his life, rules that those of us who engage in debating and shaping public policy should heed. I will leave you with but two, urging you to reflect on them all.

1st Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.

110th Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire called conscience.

Over one hundred years after George Washington copied the 110 rules of civility for himself to learn and follow, another president attempted to remind the nation that no political debate should lead to civil war, the ultimate in uncivil behavior. As all of us approach the difficult days ahead of debate on matters large and small, let us heed not only Washington's rules and his approach to public speaking on the issues of the day, but also to the words of another president who we also honor this day:

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."